

Dr. E.H. Johnson Luncheon  
Address of Rev. Rodger Hunter  
On behalf of Boarding Homes Ministry  
June 7, 2011

*Community And God's Call To Ministry*

In a basement dining room, dim and unappetizing, there was a flurry of unkind, ungentle words (well, these things can happen); and the response was this: "God is love".

We have an opportunity now to engage that small moment, to respectfully hold it, and enter a conversation with this statement of faith which rose from such an unpromising place.

This pronouncement of faith was given by quite an exquisite man, delightful and witty (sadly taken from us). He was musical, cheeky and resilient; as fantastic a friend as one might want, brimming with hospitality and all too familiar with hatred. He was devout and gracious with bright eyes and he was not well. The weary basement in which he spoke out his belief belongs to one of the boarding homes we visit. Boarding Homes Ministry does not own or operate these homes but secures permission to join with the people who live there. Ten, twenty, thirty, forty residents can live in a boarding home in a sad blend of overcrowding and isolation.

Boarding homes like this one can be found in all our cities, and sometimes in towns of just a few hundred people. There is a good chance you could find one close to your home congregation. Regrettably, because society does not always provide generous care for those who have a mental health condition, homes like these are simply part of the great Canadian landscape. One could imagine what Lawren Harris would have done with them, angular against the sky.

Once again in the basement, "God is truth", from this person so frequently lied to. Then straight away again amongst all the noise, "God is in – here"; pointing to his wonderful, traumatized self; a poignant affirmation of the indwelling Spirit. Our ministry has the privilege of inviting members from churches to build relations with the people in a home. I think it will be a gift, for in the sparse environment of a boarding home the interactions are small enough to hold the enormity of the Divine. Pared away from the world's distractions, that community in Christ can listen to all the cross-chatter of extremes: affliction and blessing, the chilling realities of enforced material poverty and spiritual riches, the whisper of Divine love, and the hard slap of stigma. It is our privilege to invite church members to become part of such a glorious holy communion.

Team members who have visited for years, and have settled into these homes, say they have found new teachers in the residents. They have acquired, in the deepest sense, a new set of spiritual advisors. Indeed, and perhaps with no melodrama, why wouldn't we expect residents to have a calling that will heal and direct? Communities of Jesus are full of happy reversals in which wisdom might rise from those shamefully branded as fools; the God of freedom may be found in places of captivity; the God of peace in places of turmoil; the God of joy in the middle of affliction. So it might follow that the God of bright glory inevitably resides in basements that drip humiliation.

A poem fragment from an intricate, restless mind:

Somewhere,  
within the innermost blissful depths  
of every human being, there resides  
an echo of mystery -

Our friend/poet in a home recited that one day, and just said, "Share it." Well, so here it is, along with an encouragement to go into a home with your own finely tuned spiritual ear and listen for the echo.

Once upon a time, on a porch, somebody said with no great theatrics, "We bring down property values". Likely she does. Stereotypes are powerful, and anyone eager to apply scapegoat theory can run with it a long way in terms of how society treats citizens in the mental health community. But, as we listen well - a mystery. Residents are – children of God, fashioned from the dust of this astonishing universe and from the loving imagination of the Divine. Beneath all the noisy static from layers of blame, and under all the shouts of accusations, we might hear their deeper narratives and find that these people are brave in the face of illness, often they have articulate prayer lives, which have much to teach us about existence and how God moves among humanity. Residents are gifted, hospitable, witty, and downright humorous at times as they bless. They are loving, solid friends and a source of happiness. They can be targets of dehumanizing words. Some get beaten for simply being who they are. The world is not always kind to those who have unchic illnesses. So no wonder such people can be all around, yet still invisible. Like in a war zone, some get *internally displaced*. The Church of Jesus might find them.

Myself, I am basically just an agent. I stand somewhere between the gifted people in the homes, and the gifted people in your churches, and suggest that life might be richer if you all got together. To help get a discussion going we are putting together a church school curriculum with lessons for ten year-olds, teenagers and adults. It might lead your congregation to consider how it could better embrace the mental health community.

Long-lasting relations can be nurtured. Some of our team members have been connected with the same home for twelve years and they speak about life becoming different. They softly speak of how priorities have shifted. They find themselves reading scripture more and praying more and gaining confidence as Christians as they exercise their own spiritual gifts. They tell of going into visits frazzled from work and coming away restored. There is joy in these homes. It is a restorative joy, and if you will allow me this point really does have to be stressed, because some might imagine that visits into homes were morose. They are not. In spite of the surroundings the overriding tone is one of gladness as people share their lives in Christ. Strong relationships are built. Teams fondly report how they have found a new family in the boarding home, and tell of how they can now gladly cradle new friends in intercession through the week. All this speaks to the fact that this model of ministry can, in fact, be done. Church members not only can do this, but can sustain this expression of community ministry through years of loving, fruitful communion. As one of the church visitors puts it, "This is not so much ministry as lifestyle".

Perhaps, we can slow this down to emphasize that this expression of community ministry is within the reach of any congregation. I think our team members are wonderful but they would not claim to be so, they would say they are just average Christians. We can do this. Church

visitors do not go into homes as clinicians or therapists; they go in as the body of Christ and the visits are an idealism-free zone. The pressure is off because nobody does community brilliantly. In all honesty, no one does. Our boarding home communities certainly don't. When we join with residents in the houses we drag along our flaws and inadequacies. Indeed, there will be, and should be, some measure of clumsiness in the dance of community - that proves it is real and not some mechanically precise liturgy. Human love, even at its most compassionate will never be 'full'. So we can really take the pressure off and join with homes without being super heroes of ministry.

Therefore, church members are released from, "I could never do this" (which I have heard all too often, and which is actually rather insulting because it suggests residents are so horrid that no average person could stay near them). People in your church, gentle, attentive, and faithful, may set aside time from their busy lives to enter a home, receive each moment as holy, and pray, laugh, grieve, worship, sing, and still themselves to reflect on what all this is in God's eyes. Members from your congregation can happily join with residents in the shaggy choreography of community.

Still once again, to take the pressure off, church members are not meant to go into the homes and know all things and have all the answers. In fact, importantly, we believe it is primarily the residents who have a calling to ministry. It is not so much that we would ever go in to spread light. We might bless along the way, all members of the Church are indeed called to ministry, but for the most part, we draw people's attention to the holy calling of the residents.

Their call will shape church visitors and move them further from the world's tired definitions of success and worth. It will overturn notions of weakness-and-strength and illness-and-wholeness. The residents are called in God to be our teachers and provide insights into the subtleties of how Spirit moves in community. Their call invites us to empty ourselves for a while, and rest in an afflicted space where holiness can be taken seriously.

Their holy calling has many levels. At times, it will overwhelm (a legitimate part of any deep pastoral relation). Illness can lie heavy. Their calling is, at times, to infuriate church visitors as they become aware of the poor treatment residents have received. Residents are called to bless us through paradoxical joy as it erupts from trying surroundings to remind us that the Spirit presides over the gathering. Their calling is to bring us into a setting where Order is sufficiently maimed to let the Spirit move. But it has to be said, that all of this is neither here nor there, if the wider church remains occupied with other matters. If the Church's priorities lie elsewhere, then the holy calling of residents will never be received.

Put simply, *their call is being held in priority sequence.*

Perhaps something can be done, for even now across the country, residents sit and wait for somebody to knock on their door.

We are grateful to the Dr. E.H. Johnson Committee for recognizing how these boarding home communities can play an important part in the spiritual life of a congregation. I am thankful to

all those who have supported the ministry. I am especially thankful for the residents who have made us so welcome, and I bring you greetings from them.